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The JOURNAL of OPEDA



Advancing professionalism among employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture

Volume 4, No. 1

April 1986

VIEWPOINT

This will introduce "Viewpoint." A new feature for the OPEDA Journal. It is our intention to challenge OPEDA members to let their viewpoints be known. All we ask is that it is readable. While we reserve the right to edit we promise to do our best to tell it your way. To save space and protect the writers, we will identify them only by their initials. The Editors

Is OPEDA membership a bargain? Most of us would agree we get far more than \$26 worth of benefits from the newsletter alone, to say nothing of the contributions to employee issues made by OPEDA's staff, Council, Board, Chapters and individuals. Most of these contributions come out of the hides of salaried and retired employees who volunteer their efforts.

But, because our dues are low, we often lag behind on important issues and defer special projects, especially those that would benefit but a part of the membership. So here are two suggestions which I hope will stimulate better ideas in future issues of this Viewpoint section, in OPEDA Board meetings, and at the Council's 1986 Annual Meeting next Fall.

1. Set OPEDA dues for current employees at one-tenth of a percent of the employee's salary. Dues for retirees could be left as is or adjusted according to his or her annuity. Dues for an employee in the GS-11 4th step (salary \$29,018) would be \$29.00.

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ELIMINATING SOCIAL SEC. WINDFALLS

After almost five years of study and debate, Congress passed the Social Security Amendments Act of 1983 (P.L. 98-21). This year, key provisions of the law went into effect. The impacts are now being recognized by the 90,000 Federal employees who have planned their retirement around the incomes from both a Federal pension and Social Security benefits. You are affected if (1) you plan to receive a pension from an employer who was not covered by Social Security, such as the Federal government, (pre 1984 hires), and (2) you expect to also receive a Social Security retirement or disability benefit. Excluded are Federal employees who were employed after 1983 and are now covered by S.S. and persons who have 30 years of S.S. coverage.

The elimination of what is referred to as windfall benefits is directed at that group of persons who have large pensions from noncovered employment, such as Federal employment before 1984 when employee and employer paid no S.S. tax.

The rationale given for the change in the law is that the S.S. benefit computation formula has always been skewed to benefit workers in the lower income categories. For example, the formula is intended to help workers who spent their whole lives in lower paying jobs by providing them with a benefit that is relatively higher in relationship to their earnings than the benefit that is provided for workers with higher earnings. Unintentionally,

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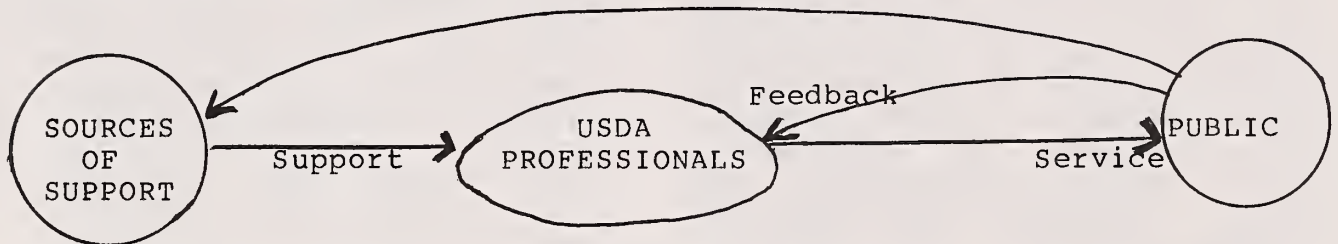
USDA PROFESSIONALISM--WILL IT SURVIVE?
by Neill Schaller

My twenty years with the Department--in research, extension, and consumer affairs--have taught me a great deal about USDA professionalism. But only since being asked to serve as OPEDA's Vice President for Professionalism have I tried to make some organized sense out of my thoughts and observations. Bear with me. I'm still trying.

To begin with, I see USDA professionalism as a means to excellence in public service, not as an end in itself. That may seem pretty obvious. But in today's climate of stress and uncertainty for civil servants, we could easily lose sight of that all important distinction between ends and means. I firmly believe that the future for USDA professionalism will be far brighter if we keep our eyes on the purpose of professionalism--and resist defending it as an end in itself. That's what I want to talk about here, inviting you to share your reactions and ideas in a later issue of this Journal.

The Means and Ends of Public Service

The little diagram below illustrates, crudely, the path to public service. Here is what it says: USDA professionals provide all kinds of public services--



farm and conservation assistance, management of public lands, meat inspection, research and education, and much more. Actually, we serve not one public but many different publics (a good subject for another Journal article). To do our jobs we need support (means). We need tangible support, such as pay, fringe benefits, physical facilities, equipment and tools to do professional work. And we need intangible support, like respect and recognition. There are different sources of support--our employer, Congress, professional peers, and organizations representing the public. Feedback from those we serve is important, too. Some of it comes to us indirectly through our bosses, Congress, colleagues, and organizations representing different publics.

The quality and effectiveness of USDA's public service depends on our professionalism. To me, the word means more than the special knowledge, training, and skills usually cited as the mark of a professional person. Professionalism is also what the person brings to and puts into his or her work. I'm talking about personal integrity, dedication, enthusiasm, ingenuity, objectivity, courage, humility, unselfish support of colleagues, and the

willingness and ability to go the extra mile. Seeing yourself as a professional person is an important part of professionalism. None of those qualities come automatically from earning a degree, paying dues to a professional society, or even being in a "professional" job. USDA's Truman Ward, when accepting OPEDA's Professional-of-the-Year Award last fall, summed it up with a simple eloquence (see Journal of OPEDA, November 1985): "Professionalism," he said, "is an attitude."

What's the Problem?

Like the circulatory system in the human body, the public service "system" is always subject to impairment or blockage at different points. The flow of support to professionals can be impaired. So can public feedback. And sometimes even we professionals are at fault. Let's look at each source of impairment in turn.

Inadequate Support. Professionalism suffers most when both tangible and intangible support are lacking for prolonged periods. But damage is done when either kind of support is missing. An adequate salary and retirement system might temper but never replace the professional's need for respect and recognition. Nor can respect and recognition substitute for tangible support. Lack of support for professionals is especially disturbing today. Ridicule by politicians of both parties is a painful example. The damage done by lack of respect and recognition goes to the heart of professionalism--to the person's self-image, sense of purpose, and inner satisfaction. I have never met a true professional who was proud to be called underworked and overpaid.

Politicization of the working climate and "game playing" can easily undermine the professional's attitude. So will mindless bureaucracy--the substitution of rules and procedures for professional judgement, reward systems that spin off more committees than rewards, and managers who forget that professionals are people, not variables in a productivity equation. Inadequate support often affects professionals and their service in subtle ways. Take reductions-in-force. Though the heaviest burden of a RIF clearly falls on those who are RIF'd, remaining professionals may find it impossible to provide high quality service when they are expected to do not only their own work but also the work of their departed colleagues. Uncertainty about everything from pay caps and changes in eligibility for retirement to rumored RIF's is another subtle threat--distracting if temporary, demoralizing when persistent.

The irony is that the more seriously we take our professionalism, the more we feel the barbs of ridicule and these other demoralizing effects. When I took the job of Extension Administrator in 1977, I felt privileged to be so involved in national public service. I learned that for those who see Federal service as a noble calling, the personal frustration caused by lack of support is all the more painful.

Some argue that support for Federal workers suffered a major setback with passage of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. You'll recall that it replaced the old Civil Service Commission, which spoke for civil servants, with the Office of Personnel Management, which speaks for the Administration. A void in support did follow that change (one which OPEDA and other professional groups have been trying to fill). However, we could err in blaming it all on legislation. The problem is not that OPM speaks for the Administration. The problem is that Administrations have not supported their employees.

Impaired Feedback. Impairment or blockage of public service can also occur when feedback from the public is inadequate. We don't talk as much about this, but I believe that professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes are enhanced by the professional's firsthand understanding of the problems and needs of those served, and of course, by constructive criticism and recognition from the public. Direct public feedback is not possible for all USDA professionals, especially those of us in Washington, D.C. That's true for people in many administrative and other support roles, as well as in agencies such as the Economic Research Service, where I work. The "publics" served directly by ERS are the Administration, Congress, and various research-related organizations. Feedback from farmers, consumers, and others comes to us indirectly. Indirect feedback is not necessarily a deterrent to professionalism, but the natural filtering and interpretation of public response, and the fact that it's just not very personal, can limit its ability to guide and recharge our professionalism.

We Professionals. It would be easy to stop with inadequate support and impaired feedback. And yet we professionals are not always innocent bystanders. In fact, for us to not admit the possibility that we could be part of the problem would, I think, raise serious doubts about our professionalism. Preoccupation with impending or imagined loss of support can lead to a kind of professional rigor mortis. I see too many signs of it today. How much of this impairment we can prevent ourselves is hard to say. But it's clear that not all of it must be blamed on others--or on the "system."

What Can We Do? Let's talk first about the problem of inadequate professional support. Here I feel compelled to mention some DONT's.

-If we complain indiscriminately or too loudly, we could simply play into the hands of those who question our worth. I don't think I'm overpaid, but I am also aware that my professional neighbors who sell real estate or do consultant work are unsalaried and probably receive no pay when they are sick or on vacation. Yes, we need to correct glaring misconceptions about civil servants, but our well-intended efforts to do so will backfire if in the public's eye we cross the line between objectivity and arrogance. Alan K. Campbell, former OPM director, offered this assessment in a Washington Post article, January 16, 1983: "For politicians, the use of the bureaucracy

as a whipping boy is too tempting, and for civil servants, the present protections of the system are too comfortable." It's easy to buy the first part, less so the second. But we can ill-afford to ignore the full message.

-The same backfiring is possible if, in response to intense competition for dollars and respect, we claim that we are more deserving of support than professionals in other Federal departments, or even other USDA agencies. Mike Causey, who writes the Federal Diary in The Washington Post, cautioned us about this tempting response when he spoke at the annual OPEDA Council meeting last fall. The point is well taken.

-Another, though lesser, peril is that of looking to our disciplines, professional groups, or outside pursuits to fill the void in intangible support from the Administration and Congress. That's not a criticism of these other sources of support. They too are essential. In fact, our skills and attitudes would suffer without disciplinary ties and outside activities. But we could conceivably lose some of our sensitivity to public problems and needs if we seek too much solace and recognition in places and from people somewhat removed from the public service orientation.

I mentioned the problem of inadequate public feedback. What can be done about that? First, I think managers and staff in contact with the public have a responsibility to feed back public response to professional colleagues who are not as close to it. Moreover, those of us in Washington, or in administrative and research roles, should capitalize on every opportunity to learn firsthand of the problems and needs of publics, and to size up the effectiveness of the services we provide. I know a researcher in ERS who often takes an extra day or so to see what is going on "out there" when he travels to professional meetings. We need to help those who support us understand how things like that can raise the quality of public service, especially now that travel will probably be among the first inputs to professionalism to feel the ax.

The Challenge Today

Current events seem to overshadow all of the potential impairments of public service I've talked about. We find ourselves and our professionalism hanging on the outcome of a major national debate now underway. The question debated is, What services can and should the Federal government provide, and for whom? Though not a new question, it is debated today with unparalleled intensity in view of the Administration's goal of less government, the enormous Federal deficit, and the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act to reduce that deficit.

What does all of this mean for USDA professionalism? I think public expectations must somehow be adjusted to fewer dollars for USDA services, or Federal policies to the wishes of publics, or both, if deterioration of USDA professionalism and the quality of

our service is to be prevented. That won't happen overnight. We will have to live with change and uncertainty for some time to come. But we should also help the citizenry and our elected representatives identify the issues and understand how different policy options might affect the quality of USDA service for different publics. This must be done with extreme care. For if we as career professionals become advocates seeking to influence policy decisions, we will permanently tarnish the very professionalism we want to protect.

Summing up

Will USDA professionalism survive? It will, as long as it stays plugged into the higher purpose of serving the public well. Idealistic or not, I can think of no more promising and personally rewarding stance for professionals than to recognize and follow the public's interest in the outcome. Know what you can change that should be changed without jeopardizing your professionalism, and what simply has to be lived with. In short, be as professional as you can, remembering that adversity is found in every noble calling.

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the formula has also benefited people who work for only a portion of their careers in jobs covered by Social Security at relatively higher wages, whose S.S. benefits are computed as if they were long term, low-wage workers. This is characterized as the "windfall benefits."

To provide for the phase-in for those workers who reach 62 or become disabled in 1986 through 1989 and for workers becoming eligible in 1990 or after, a "Modified Benefit Formula" was developed. So if you, as a Federal employee, become eligible for Civil Service Retirement System annuities and S.S. benefits in 1986 or later, the benefits received from Social Security will be adjusted based on your "Average Indexed Monthly Earnings" (AIME). The following phase-in formula is being used to calculate the monthly Social Security benefit.

<u>Formula Factor</u> \1	<u>AIME</u> \2	
80%	of \$254	= _____
32%	of \$255 - \$1,528	= _____
15%	of \$1,529 & over	= _____
	TOTAL	===== = Monthly Benefit

\1 The 80% factor is reduced by 10% until 1990, when it is fixed at 40%. The other two percentages remain the same.

\2 The calculation for AIME can be obtained from S.S. publication #05-10070, "Estimating your S.S. Retirement Check."

In view of the complications of these rulings, we suggest you query your local Social Security office. For preliminary information refer to S.S. publication #05-10045, "How Your Social Security Check is Affected by a Pension--From Work Not Covered by Social Security."

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2. Charge for special OPEDA services. Survey members once or twice a year to determine what special services members want and would be willing to pay extra for. A recent example of an extra service was FEAR News where subscribers picked up the cost of printing and mailing.

I offer these ideas--and invite your reaction--to help OPEDA move forward on our behalf in what is generally considered one of the most difficult periods for professionals in the history of Federal Civil Service.

K.K.'s Viewpoint 3/26/86

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The March 1986 issue of OPEDA News included a response to the question, "Why does everyone seem to be down on Federal employees?" that I feel treated the truth rather poorly. I found that all levels of Government service are looked upon as less than desirable by John Q. Public. (What does the "Q" stand for?) I have worked for State, City/County (single entity), and Federal levels of government, and I get a clear perception of sloppy work, ambiguous direction, and a general attitude that, "That's close enough for government work" running rife in the different levels.

I have noticed clearly in Federal government that when an individual proves to be less than satisfactory, they are not trained, but by virtue of being in a position for x number of months/years, are automatically pushed upward resulting in retirees reaching their highest level of incompetence. The folks who accept an individual as being qualified for a position lean heavily on the assumed potential of the individual when their work history clearly shows that their only qualification is length of service in the former grade.

I have yet to see an organization such as OPEDA make it a point to school their members in exercising punctuality, neatness in dress code, and avoiding abusing sick and annual leave. The attitude toward the public by government workers leaves a great deal to be desired, even between government agencies. All this has happened long before the antics of the political variety exercised by the current Administration.

W.K.'s Viewpoint 3/24/86

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We, the Federal employees and our representatives, are busy fighting off attacks on our pay, benefits and integrity of our personal careers in government. While there is a need to stand off these attacks, it is apparent we should begin a counter offensive and muster our strength to move ahead. I believe it is time to move out on a counter offensive.

I urge the leadership in OPEDA and its members to consider the ideas listed below. Let us move forward by making them a part of our discussions with anybody and everybody who will listen. (I will look forward to your views in the July issue of the OPEDA Journal.)

1. Establish a system of binding arbitration for the purpose of setting Federal employee pay and benefits, and resolving grievances. A panel or commission of nonpolitical individuals would be selected from mutually acceptable representatives. It might be called a Public Service Commission and be made up of three members, one appointed by the President, one by Congress and one selected by the Federal employees.
2. Let's work for a shorter work week. The present work week of 40 hours is higher than average in the private sector. Last year's loss of cost of living adjustments could be converted to a reduced work week. The continual practice of capping pay below the index level, which results in holding down the pay level, could also be cited as justification for reduction in the work week.
3. Sabbatical leave for education or other self improvement is an appropriate employment practice for professional employees. A sabbatical of six months with full pay or one year at half pay is a reasonable option for the employee. Sabbaticals could be earned at regular intervals, say every seven years.

T.N.'s Viewpoint 3/24/86

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A Rhetorical Question: Does OPEDA need recruiters? Obviously the answer is "Yes." OPEDA, unlike the more expensive organizations, does not hire recruiters nor does it spend a great deal of its resources on membership campaigns. OPEDA depends on its members to pass the word along. This has worked for many years (OPEDA is 57 years old this month). OPEDA needs your cooperation to carry out this task that is so vital to our continued existence.

Ask a co-worker to join today! Our expenses are growing as the need for OPEDA's programs grow. New memberships mean new money and new ideas. OPEDA continually seeks both.

Membership Application / Organization of Professional Employees, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

Name _____

Sponsor or Recruiter: _____

Mailing Address _____

Type of Membership

Dues

☐ Employed

\$26—12 Months

☐ Retired

\$13—12 Months

☐ Life (Retired only)

\$150

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone Nos. _____

Payment:

USDA Agency _____

☐ Enclosed ☐ Bill me ☐ Payroll deduction

GS Grade or equivalent _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____